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LATIN-AMERICAN MIGRATORY LABOR AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT
AND MAINTENANCE OF THE SUGAR BEET INDUSTRY IN THE UNITED STATES
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO 1945

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The tie between Latin-American migratory labor and the production and harvest of sugar beets in the United States is believed to be unique in American agriculture.

The sugar beet industry had its beginning on a commercial basis about the year 1900. In the early development of the sugar beet industry, family and local labor was relied upon for the production and harvest of sugar beet crops. In the expansion of acreage and production, not many years passed before family and local labor were not adequate to take care of increasing production. About this time Latin-American migratory workers showed up in the beet fields, and during the last quarter century have filled in the deficiencies between family and local labor supplies to enable the sugar beet industry in the United States to expand until it is now one of the major American agricultural crops. Income from the production of beet sugar and sugar beet by-products constitutes a major cog in the wheel of agriculture in a number of North Central and Western Plains States. During the years, as the sugar beet industry expanded, there has developed a recognition of employment opportunities on the part of migratory Latin-Americans -- mainly from the State of Texas. There also developed on the part of the sugar beet growers an appreciation and reliance on the Latin-American migratory worker as being probably the most desirable all around sugar beet worker available.

During the past two decades there has been developed a rather clear-cut pattern of migratory movement of Latin-American workers from the State of Texas to the North Central and Western Plains States for employment in the production and harvest of sugar beets and related crops. This movement was developed through the efforts of the sugar beet interests in cooperation with the workers. Through experience the sugar beet interests have developed a concrete procedure for recruitment, movement, and employment of Latin-American workers in the sugar beet fields. In the development of the sugar beet industry, the actual producers of sugar beets have depended upon sugar beet processors to supply outside labor needed for the production and harvest of sugar beets. This seems to have been more or less an outgrowth of contractual relationships between the sugar beet processors and the actual grower of sugar beets. Most of the recruiting of Latin-American workers is done by sugar beet processors and they in turn allot the workers to sugar beet growers. This has become a well established plan throughout the beet industry.

The principal sugar beet producing States where Texas Latin-American labor is employed are: Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado.

During the past 25 years nearly all of the Latin-American migratory labor has come from the State of Texas. The recruitment period usually covers the months of April, May, and June, when the workers migrate North and West for blocking, thinning, and hoeing of sugar beets. After this production job has been completed, around the 1st to 15th of July, there is a lapse of six to ten weeks before harvest of sugar beets begins. Then there is the harvest job of topping beets, which lasts for a period of about six weeks beginning around September 15 and ending around November 11 to 10. The Latin-Americans then migrate back to the State of Texas for employment during the winter months. Through this established process of migration the Latin-American spends about half of his time, including the winter months, in the South and the other half in sugar beet areas in the North Central and Western Plains States. This goes on year after year. Many of the migrants return North each summer to work in the sugar beets for four, five, six years or more. Of course, many of them drop out, but new ones take their place, and the stream of Latin-American migratory workers continues to flow North in the spring and South in the fall. During the past fifteen or twenty years the flow of migratory workers to the sugar beet areas has reached a high of fifty or sixty thousand. During recent war years due to other employment opportunities and to shortages of gasoline, tires, and adequate automobile and truck transportation the number of Latin-Americans migrating to the sugar beet areas dropped below twenty thousand.

Previous to enactment of the Farm Labor Law in Texas in 1942, no accurate records of migrants recruited in Texas are available, but the labor law required that all recruiters furnish a list of names and addresses of all workers recruited to the State Commissioner of Labor of Texas. Since enactment of the Farm Labor Law, recruiters have made reports to the Commissioner of Labor. The number of workers reported by years since the enactment of the Farm Labor Law has been in effect are as follows:

1942	-	51,000
1943	-	27,000
1944	-	16,310
1945	-	22,097

During World War II the production of sugar in the United States became tremendously important. In fact, sugar beets in essence became a priority crop in order to meet war time sugar needs. As part of the Farm Labor Program, a plan of cooperation between the sugar beet industry, Texas Agriculture Extension Service, and the Federal Agriculture Extension Service was worked out to facilitate the recruitment and movement of Latin-American workers from Texas to sugar beet producing areas. The Office of Price Administration and the Office of Defense Transportation cooperated by making rationed gasoline and tires available to bona fide migratory agriculture workers. This plan was put into operation at the beginning of the recruiting season for 1945 and remained in operation

for the entire recruiting season or from March to November 1. Through this cooperative plan and the wholehearted cooperation of the Texas Extension Service a total of 22,097 Latin-Americans was recruited by sugar beet interests and made available to sugar beet growers for the production and harvest of sugar beets in the several sugar beet States. The number of Latin-Americans recruited, however, was not adequate to meet the labor requirements incident to the production and harvest of the 1945 sugar beet crop. Sugar beet growers had to rely heavily on war prisoners and foreign labor to fill out the difference between the supply of Latin-American and local sources of labor and the amount required to produce and harvest the crop. Sugar beet producers do not expect war prisoners to be available to them in 1946, and they expect a smaller number of foreign workers to be made available to them in 1946 than was available in 1945. If production of sugar beets in the United States is to be increased or even held at present levels, beet producers are naturally now raising the question as to the source of labor in 1946.

In January, 1945, when a plan of procedure to facilitate movement of migratory workers recruited in Texas for employment in sugar beets and related crops in North Central and Western Plains States was agreed upon by sugar beet interests, Texas Agriculture Extension Service, and the Federal Agriculture Extension Service, there was contained in the plan a general statement of policy as follows:

"Under the Farm Labor Supply Act (Public Laws 229 and 529 - 78th Congress) the Cooperative Extension Service of the War Food Administration and the State Agriculture Colleges are responsible for the domestic labor phases of the program 'for assisting in providing an adequate supply of workers for the production, harvesting, and preparation for markets of agricultural commodities essential to the prosecution of the war.' In performing this function the Extension Service is desirous of maintaining established movements of agricultural workers. It aims to supplement, not to displace, the efforts of agricultural producers to recruit workers and of agricultural workers to find employment. Both employers and workers are to be encouraged to use their own initiative in making employment arrangements and in solving employment problems. Employment relationships which have proven satisfactory are to be maintained in so far as possible."

"The recruitment of migratory workers, in Texas to be moved to sugar beet areas in the North Central and Plains States, will be conducted in accordance with State laws applying to such activities, and in accordance with Federal Government regulations relating to the conservation of gasoline and tires."

The 1945 program was carried out as agreed upon. Because of the program there was developed a closer and more sympathetic understanding of problems

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involved in the recruitment, movement, and employment of Latin-Americans in the sugar beet States. The cooperation of all concerned was whole-hearted and harmonious during 1945.

In an effort to more fully carry out the mandate of Congress "for assisting in providing an adequate supply of workers for the production, harvesting, and preparation for markets of agricultural commodities essential to the prosecution of the war", the author visited representative sugar beet producing States including Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Colorado to make observations of Latin-Americans at work in the sugar beet fields and to obtain information from workers, employers, and Extension Service representatives in the States concerned as to:

1. The adaptability of the Latin-American as a worker in the production and harvest of sugar beets.
2. Contractual relationships between workers and employers of Latin-Americans.
3. Wage earnings of Latin-Americans in production and harvest of sugar beets.
4. Housing and sanitary conditions provided for the workers.
5. Attitude of employers and Extension Service representatives as to the importance they placed on the value of adequate housing and sanitary facilities as an aid to securing and keeping the most dependable labor.
6. Satisfaction or lack of satisfaction on the part of Latin-American workers with work and living conditions offered by employers in the sugar beet States.

This trip was made during the month of October, 1945. Since the Texas Agriculture Extension Service plays a major role in the recruitment and transportation of Latin-Americans for employment in the sugar beet States, Caesar Hohn, State Supervisor, Emergency Farm Labor Program in Texas, accompanied the author for most of the trip. We visited sugar beet processing representatives, sugar beet growers, representatives of State agriculture extension services, and Latin-American workers in the States mentioned above. On completing the trip, Mr. Hohn concurred with the author in the following observations:

The Adaptability of the Latin-American as a worker in the sugar beets:

The Texas Latin-Americans apparently are the most desirable imported sugar beet workers. Many growers stated that the only complaint they had to make about Texas Latin-Americans was they did not get enough of them. Many growers stated that the Latin-American worker was more satisfactory than German war prisoners,

Mexican Nationals, or transported domestic workers. The Latin-American seems to have physical requirements which make him an ideal beet worker. In sugar beet areas a common belief is that because Latin-Americans are usually short in stature--"built close to the ground"--that they are better adapted to what sugar beet growers call "stoop work." Sugar beet growers say it is more difficult and tiring for a tall person to stand the "stoop work."

Contractual Relationships: On the inspection tour, many Texas Latin-Americans were contacted in the fields and at their homes. Most of them expressed satisfaction with the wages they were earning and the treatment they were receiving from employers. Contractual relationships begin with recruitment. Recruiters representing the sugar beet interests approach the workers at their homes or other meeting places in Texas and outline conditions of employment for the production and harvest season. In addition to wages, off-season work opportunities, housing, and other stipulations, workers usually request and secure travel and subsistence advances in order to transport themselves and their families from Texas to point of employment. Customary travel and subsistence advances are \$15.00 for transportation and \$3.00 to \$5.00 for subsistence for each worker. On behalf of sugar beet growers, recruiters make contracts with the workers to extend through the harvest period, and it is understood that for all workers remaining on the job through completion of harvest or contract expiration date will be relieved of payment of travel and subsistence advances. The penalty for breaking contract; that is, leaving before the expiration date of the contract or before the harvest season ends, the workers are charged with and pay travel and subsistence advances made at the time of recruitment. On the return trip the worker bears this expense himself.

Wage Earnings: The minimum wage floor for beet operations is fixed under the provisions of the sugar act. It was learned that a considerable number of beet growers were paying more than minimum wages. Some growers paid bonuses and extended other types of remuneration over and above the minimum stipulated in the contract. Mr. H. W. Herbison, State Supervisor, Emergency Farm Labor Program of North Dakota, in the weekly News Letter under date of October 23, 1945, made some significant observations regarding employer-worker relationships in North Dakota with special reference to wages. Excerpts from Mr. Herbison's observations on this point are as follows:

"A certain percent of the labor force is always hard to satisfy. When a third of a labor force assigned one area is 'missing in action' and ninety-five percent working in another area you begin to wonder if the expenditure of a few nickels and dimes wouldn't result in the saving of many dollars in useful work performed and a valuable crop saved. And especially so in a year like this when beet labor of any kind has been as scarce as hens' teeth.

"In the Red River Valley, it is not unusual for growers to pay beet harvesters who stay thru to completion of their job a bonus over 'minimum floor price.' Growers go on a floor of not less than \$1.35 per ton, a dime over the legal minimum; most of them, however, were operating this fall on a rate of \$1.65 thru mutual agreement, where the worker takes all the beets in the row, little and big. We also have growers who shoot at 60¢ an hour for a nine-hour day as a fair harvest rate, or \$1.35 a ton--whichever is greater for the worker. Out of this practice labor feels that it is getting a half-way square deal, the farmer is getting his beets harvested, and a lot of headaches are being saved in dealing with striking labor, walk-offs, and all the rest.

"In another area of the state, we have observed a lot more difficulty in keeping labor satisfied and working. There is no evidence of a material difference in housing and subsistence arrangements for workers in this area compared with the Red River Valley. The main difference seems to be one of minimum and prevailing wage practice. For harvesting operations that area has a minimum floor of \$1.25 per ton to comply with requirements of the sugar act. In actual practice this minimum floor rate became the prevailing wage rate offered and paid to harvest beets, regardless of the weather conditions; percent of small beets; and yield variation from farm to farm."

It is recognized that sugar beet work is hard work. It is what you would call plain hard manual labor, but a skilled sugar beet worker can make comparatively good wages at the 1945 wage levels. One Latin-American boy who looked to be about 18 years old stated that he could top nine tons of beets a day. Another Latin-American worker stated that he and his family, a total of six workers, were topping five truck loads a day. As each truck load weighed $5\frac{1}{2}$ tons, this was \$34 a day for the family at \$1.25 a ton. He was asked if he was saving his money, and he stated that he was saving some of it. When asked how much he would take back to Texas with him, he said he thought he would be able to take back "twenty hundred dollars." Of course, the yield of beets, the skill of the worker, the length of the work day all enter into daily wage earnings; but after consultation with a number of employers and workers, they figure that the average beet worker, in average beets, for an average work day can top from three to five tons.

It has been repeatedly pointed out that there is need for an educational program or the employment of other devices to encourage thrift and savings among Latin-American workers. As a rule, the workers make reasonable wages, but too few of them appreciate the importance of the proverbial "saving for a rainy day." It's "easy come, easy go" with too many of them. Some who think that education would help, also suggested that,

through agreement with the workers, employers hold out a considerable portion of the earnings of the workers until contracts have been fulfilled or until the worker is ready to return home. However, whatever devices are employed to encourage savings should be devices that the worker understands and voluntarily agrees to. The right of the worker to draw his wages, when earned, and to spend his money as he desires cannot be denied him. Education and encouragement should result in substantial improvement.

Sugar beet wages as a whole are not comparable to wages paid for the harvest of some other specialty crops in the same or adjacent areas such as tomato or potato picking. Consequently, beet harvest is sometimes delayed until these other crops are out of the way. Some localized sections in the sugar beet States offer better off-season employment for sugar beet workers than is found in other sections. As a rule, the tomato crop and potato crop fit in nicely in offering off-season employment opportunities for the workers where these crops are grown in the same or nearby areas.

There is need for coordination of effort among users of Latin-American workers. Sugar beets alone do not offer full employment for the season. Fullest employment opportunities are found in areas where a combination of cash crops are grown, such as sugar beets, tomatoes, and cucumbers. So far as labor requirements are concerned these crops "dovetail" and offer maximum work opportunities throughout the summer and fall season. In areas where sugar beets alone are grown as the chief cash crop there is much loss of time for workers between blocking and thinning operations in spring and early summer and topping operations in the fall.

When sugar beet production and harvest is fully mechanized there will be considerably less need for outside labor for sugar beets. If growers of other crops requiring outside labor do not coordinate their efforts with sugar beet growers now, they will have to develop a program of their own later.

There is plenty of evidence to show the desirability of coordination in the States needing workers. Also, it might prove much more satisfactory for a centralized recruiting agency to recruit workers for all employers of outside labor. If sugar beet, tomato, potato, cucumber and other interests continue to work independently of each other, only haphazard results can be expected.

Housing and Sanitary Conditions: As would be expected, some poor housing and lack of appreciation on the part of the employer as to the value of comfortable housing was found, but for the most part the workers were comfortably housed.

A keen appreciation of the value of housing was found among all the extension people contacted. Housing has been emphasized by the Extension Services, and substantial progress has been made in this field, but the job has not been completed, and Extension Services are still emphasizing the value of adequate housing and sanitary facilities for the workers. Also, there appeared to be a growing consciousness of the necessity for better housing on the part of sugar beet growers. We saw as evidence a number of recent improvements. There was also ample evidence to show that most Latin-American families appreciate comfortable living conditions. One Latin-American wife expressed it this way: "This is our second year in the sugar beet fields. We lived up the road last year about thirty miles and worked for another employer. We did not go back there this year because the house was not good. We came here because the house is good, and we have good water. The landlord treats us right, and we will be back here next year."

As a rule Latin-American families seemed to be taking care of the houses they lived in. No broken windows or doors or other abuse of property was observed. Certainly if such abuses existed at all, they were the exception rather than the rule. Reasonable housing and sanitary conditions, plus fair play and sympathetic understanding between the employer and the Latin-American employee offers the best solution to adequate and stable supplies of labor.

There was observed many examples of ideal employer-employee relationships where the house was good, good water available, with reasonable sanitary facilities, plus square dealing on the part of the landlord, and satisfaction on the part of the employee and his family. As a rule where such conditions existed, the Latin-American family returns year after year to the same employer. Where these conditions do not exist, the Latin-American family either fails to return to the sugar beet fields or if it does it seeks a new employer.

Characteristics of Latin-American Workers: The Latin-American worker, not unlike other people, believes in a square deal. Usually he respects the contract he makes and in turn he expects the employer to respect his part of the contract. If the employer offers reasonably comfortable living conditions and deals fairly with the worker there is usually satisfaction on the part of the worker. If the worker feels that he has been fairly treated, he usually likes his employer, and if he likes his employer and feels that he is getting a square deal, he will return again and again to the same employer year after year. Not only this, but he will also pass along a good word for the employer to other workers. Employers who understand the Latin-American worker usually have the least trouble in securing the workers they need.

As a rule a Latin-American worker does not argue. He does not ask for much. He usually does not say what he thinks, but he does have a keen sense of values. If in his opinion something is wrong, he either "shows up missing" some morning or will fail to return to the same landlord the following year. He tells others. This makes it hard for an employer to get labor in future years. Of course, there are some unscrupulous Latin-American workers just as are such persons in other groups, but sugar beet representatives and employers, who have had many years of experience in dealing with Latin-American workers, speak highly of the honesty, integrity, and dependability of the Latin-American worker. Sugar beet representatives who recruit thousands of Latin-American workers in Texas year after year advance the workers many thousands of dollars for transportation, subsistence, automobile and truck repair, and even money for the purchase of tires and other items essential for transportation to destination. Sugar beet representatives report that in nearly every case the worker keeps his word and shows up at point of destination. The companies report that their loss of advanced funds made in this manner are negligible usually running less than 5% and in many cases less than 3%. This speaks well for the honesty of the Latin-American worker.

In the movement of migratory Latin-American workers there developed two chief means of travel on the part of the workers. One, private automobile owned by the worker who takes his own family, makes his own "trade" with his employer, and feels no responsibility to anyone else. The other method of travel was by truck where a truck owner would take several families, sometimes thirty to forty persons, from point of recruitment to destination. Truck owners who transport groups of workers are known as "crew leaders" or "capitans." In many instances a crew leader recruits his load of workers and he expects remuneration for such services from employers. He also collects a price for the transportation from the workers he recruits and delivers to destination. In many cases he exercises or attempts to exercise bargaining power with employers and assumes overlordship over the workers he recruits and transports. In addition to these functions, he also expects employment for himself and his truck at point of destination and until he is ready to return "his" group of workers back home. For the 1945 season it was estimated that approximately 60% of the 22,097 workers migrating North from Texas traveled in privately owned automobiles or small trucks, and about 40% were transported by crew leaders in large trucks. Crew leaders are not always popular with employers of Latin-American workers, neither are they always popular with the workers. The worker's preference is to own his own automobile or small truck and move at will as an independent. Shortage of transportation facilities during the war years made more workers dependent upon truck owners for transportation, but as soon as automobiles and small trucks, including ample supplies of tires and gasoline, are made available to the public a very large percentage of

the workers will purchase and own their own vehicles and the number of crew leaders will diminish.

The average Latin-American worker and his family prefer to live and work to themselves in privacy and preferably on the farms where they are employed. They do not like group housing. Experience shows that the percentage of "casualties" is much higher in group housing than when each family has its own quarters.

Education Program: One discouraging aspect of the employment of Latin-American workers in sugar beets is what is commonly called "casualties" among the workers. It was learned that even during the "best" years the number of workers leaving their employers for other work or to return home was great enough to cause anxiety on the part of many employers. In order to bring about a better understanding of the characteristics of Latin-American workers and how best to deal with these workers, an educational program for employers of Latin-American workers in the sugar beet States where the workers are normally employed is needed. Such an educational program should have a tendency to stabilize the workers "in place" and greatly reduce the number of "casualties." An education program should also be conducted among migratory workers on their home grounds in Texas to point out their responsibility in connection with work opportunities offered them and that they respect their contracts and not leave employers without just cause. Such educational programs should be developed and led by State Extension Services not only in Texas, but in the States where Latin-American workers from Texas are employed. There is no doubt that such an educational program would result in better relationships and understanding between employers and workers.

One sugar company has employed a Latin-American liaison representative for the past several years. He has a wide acquaintance among Latin-American workers and seems to have their confidence. The sugar company employs him year round. He circulates among the workers while they are in the North and he is a key figure in the company's recruitment program in the South in the spring. Evidently his work is considered worth while. The company continues him on its pay roll. Incidentally, this particular company recruits more Latin-American workers than any other.

In an effort to bring about better relationships and understandings between employers and employees, it is suggested that a liaison representative be employed in each State using a large number of Latin-American workers. The liaison representative should be employed by the Extension Service and not be responsible to employers or employee. The liaison representative should be a man of broad judgment. He

should have a full knowledge of the problems of the employer, as well as the employee, and should represent both fairly and honestly. He should be able to speak Spanish and enjoy the confidence of the workers. His conduct should also inspire confidence among employers.

Mechanization: Mechanization in the production and harvest of sugar beets is well on its way, but will be several years before it reaches the point when machinery will greatly curtail the need for hand labor. Certainly 1946 will be a critical year, but after 1946, when sugar beet harvesting machines and other improved machinery for handling beets are made available in increasing quantities, sugar beet growers will utilize improved machinery as fast as they can acquire it. As machinery becomes available to do the job, fewer and fewer sugar beet workers will be needed. Most sugar beet growers feel that the mechanization process will have been pretty well completed within a period of from 3 to 5 years beginning in 1946, but until such time as mechanization can be brought into full effect, sugar beet growers will continue to look to Texas as the best source of sugar beet labor.

Summary and Suggestions: The migratory movement of Latin-American workers from the State of Texas to North Central and West Plains States for employment in the production and harvest of sugar beets and related crops is a well-established pattern.

Adequate housing and sanitary conditions for the workers are necessary to successful results. Marked progress has been made in providing suitable housing, but the job has not been completed and should receive continued emphasis.

There is need for further improvement in employer-employee relationships. Employers should have a thorough knowledge of the characteristics of Latin-American workers and how best to get along with them.

There is need for better coordination of effort among users of Latin-American labor for fullest utilization of available labor in beets and related crops and to insure the workers fullest possible employment. It is suggested that consideration be given to the organization of a centralized recruiting agency, which would represent all users of Texas Latin-American workers. Of course, all users would bear their fair share of recruitment and transportation expense.

There is need for an educational program among employers of Latin-Americans to bring about a better understanding of characteristics of Latin-American workers and to improve techniques in relationships, also education among the workers to teach them thrift, to respect contracts they make with employers, care of houses and other property

provided by employers, and desirable personal behavior and conduct. There also is need for better opportunities for the children of the workers to go to school.

Mechanization in production and harvest of sugar beets is well on its way and when complete will greatly reduce the number of workers required. This stage of development is several years away.

There is great anxiety among the sugar beet growers, as well as representatives of the sugar beet companies about an adequate supply of labor for 1946. They want a 1946 program developed at the earliest feasible date. They expressed a desire to work in cooperation with Texas and Federal Extension Services. They were pleased with the 1945 program. With the loss of war prisoners in 1946, and a reduction in numbers of foreign workers, they know of no other good source of labor except Texas. To reach sugar beet goals in 1946, the sugar beet growers will need many more Texas Latin-Americans in 1946 than they had in 1945. Certainly Texas' agriculture problems for 1946 must be taken into account in any plans developed for the purpose of recruiting and moving Latin-American workers out of the State of Texas. It seems wise to agree upon a program for 1946 which is acceptable to the Texas Extension Service and which would enable the Texas Extension Service to extend maximum cooperation.